

George Washington and the Virtue of Temperance

Presented by Dan M. Kemble, Master, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, at Robert M. Sirkle Lodge No. 954, Lexington, Kentucky, February 19, 2019

“In politics as in religion, my tenets are few and simple. The leading one of which, and indeed that which embraces most others, is to be honest and just ourselves and to exact it from others, meddling as little as possible in their affairs where our own are not involved. If this maxim was generally adopted, wars would cease and our swords would soon be converted into reap hooks and our harvests be more peaceful, abundant, and happy.”

— George Washington

The most recognizable Mason in American History, George Washington was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, on February 22, 1732.

Our vision of Washington is clouded by 287 years of the distance of time, the mythology that grew up around the Washington Legend and shifting winds of the political landscape. Most of what we popularly believe to be true about Washington is myth: he didn't cut down a cherry tree, then heroically proclaim to his father, “I cannot tell a lie.” That particular fable was created by Mason Locke Weems, better known as “Parson Weems,” who published **The Life of Washington** in 1800, just a year after Washington's death. Parson Weems is also responsible for the story of Washington throwing a silver dollar across the Rappahannock River (silver dollars did not exist when Washington was a youth).

A popular myth persists that Washington had wooden teeth. He did have dentures, but they were not made of wood. Washington's dentures were constructed in the same manner as other false teeth of the day – from ivory, glass, porcelain and cadaver teeth. It is true that his dentures never fit him well, perhaps accounting for his somewhat dour appearance in many of his portraits.

Up through the 200th anniversary of the founding of our nation, Americans were taught, to the general agreement of all, to revere the Founding Fathers. Such reverence was part of the shared American experience and helped foster national unity (and identity) across political and economic lines. Contemporary society holds no such reverence for the Founders and they are frequently criticized and scorned for their failures to meet the cultural and political standards of the 21st century. Washington has not escaped such modern-day criticism.

The nature of Freemasonry is such that, contra to the whims of contemporary culture, we continue to look to our forefathers as examples and to find parallels within our own lives matching theirs. Because of this, George Washington, who perhaps better than any other historical figure embodied the best attributes of Freemasonry, continues to be remembered and revered among American Freemasons.

Bro. Washington was initiated as an Entered Apprentice Mason on November 4, 1752 in Fredericksburg Lodge # 4 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He was subsequently passed to the Degree of a Fellow Craft on March 3, 1753 and raised to the sublime Degree of a Master Mason on August 4, 1753, all ceremonies being conducted by Fredericksburg Lodge # 4.

Although 266 years have passed since his initiation, we all share a bond with Bro. Washington. Because of the unchanging nature of Masonry, we can know with reasonable assurance that Washington took the same vows as an Entered Apprentice Mason that we assumed over two centuries later. In all probability, as a part of his Entered Apprentice Degree, Washington was introduced to the four cardinal virtues of a Mason – Justice, Fortitude, Prudence and Temperance. We can be equally confident that during the ceremonies, Bro. Washington heard the question, “As an Entered Apprentice Mason, what came you here to do?” The answer then, as it is now, is: “To learn, to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry.”

It is this phrase, “to subdue my passions,” and the Masonic virtue of Temperance, that is the focus of this presentation.

Temperance is defined as the act of voluntary self-restraint; It is the act of refraining from exercising an act which one otherwise has the ability to perform. Our ritual says that Temperance is that due restraint upon the affections and passions which renders the body tame and governable and frees the mind from the allurements of vice. It is no accident that Freemasonry joins subduing one’s passions with learning and improvement. In each of our three degrees we promise some act of restraint, or temperance. We promise not to reveal the secrets of our fraternity. We promise not to cheat, wrong or defraud each other. We promise not to divulge the confidences reposed in us by our brothers. We promise not to violate the chastity of the female relatives of other Masons. We promise not to strike another Mason in anger.

All of these promises reflect the Masonic virtue of temperance. We have the physical ability to perform all of the things that we have promised not to do. But it is the quality of temperance – the exercise of restraint and patience – that does truly curb our passions and lead us to be better men.

Brother George Washington clearly mastered the virtue of temperance. There are three examples from his life – one from personal life and two from his public life – to which I wish to draw your attention this evening. Each of these examples reflect the attitude that Washington displayed toward temperance and restraint.

The first example is found in a letter that Bro. Washington wrote to his young niece, Harriot Washington. Washington wrote, “You are just entering the state of womanhood, without the watchful eye of a Mother to admonish or the protecting aid of a Father to advise and defend you; you may not be sensible (aware) that you are at this moment about to be stamped with that character which will adhere to you through life. Think, then, to what dangers a giddy girl of 15 or 16 must be exposed in circumstances like these. *To be under but little or no control may be pleasing to a mind that does not reflect, but this pleasure cannot be of long duration.*”

Every man here this evening who is a parent has at one time or another had the pleasure of explaining to a child why it isn't necessarily a good idea to do something just because you can. Washington was engaged in that same level of discourse with his niece. His letter to her reflects his (and Masonry's) value on self restraint and reflection.

The next two examples come from Washington's public life.

First, in 1782, after the end of the Revolutionary War and before the writing and ratification of the Constitution, Washington received a letter from one of his officers, Major Lewis Nicola. In what has become known as the "Newburgh Letter," Nicola suggested that Washington proclaim himself king. Washington replied to Nicola by letter the same date and called Nicola's suggestion "a calamity."

Washington could have been king. He was the single unifying figure in the post Revolutionary War United States. He had the stature and the popularity to declare himself king. Surely Washington was aware that a kingdom was his for the taking. It seems almost impossible to imagine that the idea was not at least a little bit tempting to him. But all of the historical evidence points to the contrary.

Washington rejected the idea of proclaiming himself king. His prompt response to Nicola was unequivocal. Washington fought against England for the concept of republican government. To fight and win such a battle, then embrace a monarchy for his own sake, would have been a repudiation of the principles in which he believed.

In **Washington: A Life**, Ron Chernow writes, "But over the years, this man of deep emotions and strong opinions had learned to subordinate his personal dreams and aspirations to the service of a large cause, evolving into a statesman with a prodigious mastery of political skills and unwavering sense of America's future greatness. In the things that mattered most for his country, he had shown himself capable of constant growth and self-improvement."

Could Washington have proclaimed himself king? Most certainly the answer is yes. But Washington realized that to do so would not only ultimately be ruinous to his newborn country, but would also cause him to betray his own beliefs. Washington exercised the Masonic virtue of temperance. He could have been king, yet he chose to exercise restraint in making what he believed to be the best choice for his country.

The final example of Washington's temperance is his refusal to accept a third term as president of the United States. He actually made this refusal on two separate occasions – once following his second inauguration in 1793 and again preceding the presidential election of 1796.

At the beginning of his second term as president in 1793, Washington made it clear to all that he would not accept a third term as president. First, he was simply exhausted by public life and wanted to return to Mt. Vernon. Second, he believed that it was important to establish the precedent of a peaceful and orderly transition of the office of the presidency. He feared that if he accepted a third term and then died in office, the precedent would be established that the presidency was an office to which one was elected for life. Washington was determined to avoid this, so he refused all entreaties to accept a third term.

Washington's act of restraint in refusing a third term established the precedent of an orderly transition of presidential power. This precedent has been so strong that it has guided our country through the difficult days following the deaths and resignations of presidents. Indeed, the orderly transition of power is one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes the United States from most of the world's other nations.

Brother George Washington exercised the Masonic virtue of temperance personally and publicly. His restraint led to the development of a high moral character which benefitted him individually and the country as a whole. Bro. Washington is our best example of how subduing one's passions lead to improvement.

In his book, **Patriarch**, presidential historian Richard Norton Smith writes the following passage, "Even at this stage of his career, then, Washington remained a revolutionary. But it was a revolution of character, not of politics, to which he committed himself. He staked his presidency – and his place in history – on a belief that men could be wise enough to restrain their passions and reasonable enough to keep government in check."

In a recent article in "The Journal of the Masonic Society," Worshipful Bro. Mark Tabbert referred to Washington as "a perfect ashlar." Indeed, Washington personifies this Masonic symbol perhaps better than person in our history. But Washington became a perfect ashlar through decades of the practice of virtue and dedication to self-improvement.

What then, is the contemporary application of Bro. Washington's example? It is this – let us practice patience and restraint in a civil society where such virtues are considered quaint and old fashioned. Let us be faithful to our sacred vows of temperance. Let us be wise enough to reflect and to restrain our passions. Like Washington, let us also be participants in a revolution of character.

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